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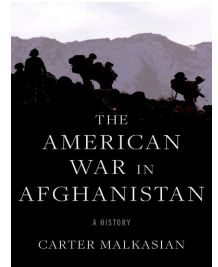


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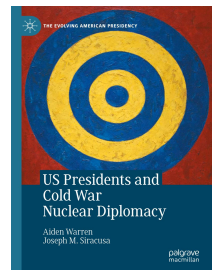
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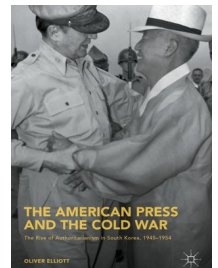
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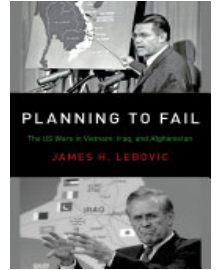
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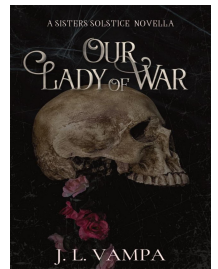
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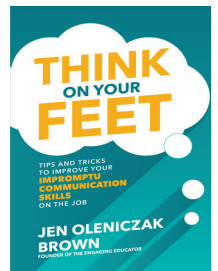
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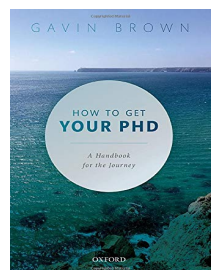
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The Press  
and Diplomacy  
in Afghanistan

KATHERINE A. BROWN

Your Country, Our War



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The Press and Diplomacy  
in Afghanistan

KATHERINE A. BROWN

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*For my parents, John and Christine Brown,  
who gave me the world.*



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## Preface

THE FIRST TIME I met Hamid Karzai was on December 15, 2003. My colleagues from the American embassy and I waited for him in a white, airy tent on the grounds of the Polytechnic University in western Kabul, a few feet away from where 502 delegates gathered for the *Constitutional Loya Jirga*. The men, and some women, from each of Afghanistan's 32 provinces were working to forge the country's first democratic constitution in its 5,000-year history via a massive, grand version of the traditional assembly known as a *jirga*.<sup>1</sup> As an optimistic 25-year-old, I had arrived in Afghanistan a month before to serve as a junior press aide.

The U.S. news media version of Afghanistan depicted a country full of rapid progress after bleak decades of war and fundamentalism. A new constitution was one of the many firsts in Afghanistan that would happen in the next year, including the first paved highway from Kabul to Kandahar, the first presidential election, and the first independent television station. My colleagues and I were eager to continue to pitch these hopeful news stories to the American press. While U.S. embassies' public affairs officers normally target local press, the Afghan media were so nascent, and the concept of free speech was so foreign, that local journalists looked to their American and other Western counterparts for content and editorial guidance. But by late 2003, the majority of Western broadcast stations had shifted their attention 1,800 miles away to Iraq, the other U.S.-led post-9/11 war. With the communications infrastructure still weak in Afghanistan, and no U.S. television reporters stationed in the country, we purchased satellite time so that news anchors in New York could directly interview the Afghan President about the *jirga* as a historic milestone.

We turned the tent into a miniature, barebones television studio. It was winter in Kabul and we all shivered as we waited for Karzai to arrive. Around 8 p.m., the U.S. east coast 9.5 hours behind, he swept in wearing his signature green and blue striped cape and lamb's wool hat.

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In impeccable English, he spoke excitedly of the day's deliberations and what that meant for Afghanistan's future. We guided him to a chair and placed an "IFB" (interruptible foldback) that provided an audio feed into his ear. Then we stood and watched as he spoke to Tom Brokaw of NBC News about the progress taking place in America's "good war," which also was already being referred to as a forgotten one.<sup>2</sup> Karzai often smiled as he spoke, his rapport with the anchor already firmly established during the previous two years. His tone was easy and relaxed.

To the West, Karzai was a symbol of optimism, unification, and progress—even elegance. Acclaimed fashion designer Tom Ford called him in 2002 "the chicest man on the planet"; *Esquire* magazine later anointed him one of the best-dressed men in the world, alongside Tom Brady and Jay-Z.<sup>3</sup> He was not just a darling of the American government, but also of the American press.

That cold December night was at the top of my mind on October 24, 2016, as I was escorted into Karzai's residence in the former United Nations compound in the center of Kabul, around the corner from the presidential palace he had occupied for nearly 13 years. It was the same compound where, in 1996, the Taliban castrated former president Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai and his brother, and then tied them to trucks and dragged them to their deaths through the streets of Kabul. The same compound that, nearly five years later, hosted a fresh generation of UN employees who believed the new international coalition was accelerating advancement in a country that desperately deserved it.

After passing through three waves of security, where women patted me down and took away all but my notebook and voice recorder, I entered the familiar space. The compound was an oasis from the haze of car exhaust on the streets. Four one-floor buildings lined the perimeter of a lush green courtyard with vibrant rose bushes holding on to the last warmth of the year. Delegations of Afghans from throughout the country walked through the compound daily to see Karzai, to still consult with him about their problems and ask for his help. I passed one delegation, and one of Karzai's young male assistants escorted me to a waiting room. Two elders from Nangarhar, an eastern province that borders Pakistan, were already there. "She is writing a book," an aide must have said to them in Pashto as I sat down. The elder closest to me turned and said in English, "You are writing a book!" It was more of a statement than a question, but I nodded anyway.



After more than a dozen years of traveling to Afghanistan for work and research, I went to Kabul in fall 2016 to finish writing this book. I completed my doctoral dissertation in 2013 on the Afghan, American, and Pakistani news media's storytelling during the U.S.-led war. I then sat on the research for years, chipping away at rewrites for no more than a couple hours a week. I decided to focus exclusively on the U.S.-Afghan relationship for the book and realized that the nearly four-year pause was necessary to see what had become of the country after the 2014 deadline President Barack Obama had set for American troop withdrawal—and soon after the U.S.-led war entered its sixteenth year on October 7, 2016.

"We are here to talk about Daesh!" the elder proclaimed, using the Arabic term for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Daesh's activities in Iraq and Syria and its encroachment into Europe and the United States had become the dominant foreign news story in the American press in 2015 and 2016, far surpassing any mention of al Qaeda and/or the Taliban. "You know about Daesh?" he asked me with a smile.

"Yes," I replied. "I'm an American. We know about Daesh." I smiled back.

Both of the elders laughed, likely amused that I thought I knew about the apocalyptic death cult they were trying to keep from invading their homes when they weren't busy trying to keep the Taliban at bay.

Graciously, they insisted I speak with the former president first. I was escorted outside. Karzai was there, waving me over. He had traded his cap and cape for a simple *khet partug*, the traditional Pashtun dress of a beige flowy tunic and wide-legged pants with a black vest. We walked together to another building, which housed his library. One of his small daughters ran to him and he stopped to introduce me. A lifetime had elapsed between the 2003 Constitutional Loya *Jirga* and the present day, and he understandably didn't remember me. I explained briefly who I was, why I had come to Afghanistan in the first place, and why I had requested to see him.

As an administrative aide to President Bush's National Security Advisor in 2002–2003, I believed in the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and volunteered to be a public affairs assistant at the embassy in Kabul. Unlike the tightly controlled environment of 2016, I was fairly mobile when I lived in the American compound. I traveled to Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Kunar, Sheberghan, Bamiyan, and Herat, and I embraced a country seemingly unrivaled in its ability to combine beauty with tragedy. The long history it had with the United States, its centrality to centuries

of great power politics, and the devastation it suffered along the way both fascinated and horrified me. After I stopped working for the U.S. government in late 2004, I sought reasons to return. The chaos and complexity of the place drove many Americans and Westerners from there, mad and frustrated. But for some of us, trying to understand Afghanistan and the region became an addiction, as we felt inexplicably connected to the people and their enduring struggle for a life of peace. We felt we could do something to help.

But this time in 2016, more than any other visit, the city felt starkly different, and the American media's coverage reflected that. Setbacks in the Afghan economy, its security, its democratic governance, and nationwide respect for human rights—especially for women—were well documented despite a progressive technocrat, Ashraf Ghani, serving as president of a shaky national unity government that was engineered by the United States in 2014. Wazir Akbar Khan—the neighborhood with Karzai's current compound as well as the presidential palace, U.S. and other Western embassies, and the International Security Assistance Force—was now heavily fortified. I could barely recognize the area; its once familiar buildings were now locked up behind high, armored walls with coils of barbed wire. Some Westerners began to refer to the neighborhood as the “Green Zone,” a term from the U.S.-led Iraq War that meant the space was secured from outside threats. We had never used that term in Kabul before. Nestled in the middle of it was the *New York Times* house, where I stayed for this trip. I woke up each morning to the sound of helicopters flying overhead. They were moving not troops but U.S. embassy civilians between their offices and the airport—which was only a mile away; the short stretch of road was deemed to be too dangerous to drive. The idea that American officials were living in Afghanistan was only by time zone; more than ever before, the U.S. embassy felt frighteningly isolated.

The deteriorating situation had been reflected in the American media's shifting portrayal of the country over the years as well as their shifting portrayal of Karzai himself. By the end of his presidency, he too was isolated, rarely leaving the palace grounds, preferring instead that Afghan provincial leaders come to him, as they still do today. He and his country watched nearly 200,000 American soldiers, diplomats, and aid workers who tried to provide security and development support for the country come and go. When security did not improve, when the war dragged on, when corruption worsened, when infrastructure deteriorated, Karzai became

increasingly vocal about his aggravation with his American and other Western partners. By 2009, he began to openly clash with the Obama administration, accusing U.S. officials of interference and hypocrisy. In August 2016, he had told the press that “the Americans, whose primary slogan is democracy, are making a sham of democracy in Afghanistan.”<sup>4</sup> He thought that the American free press was also a sham, voicing a belief held by the leaders of many other developing countries: that in the same way the American government has the power to shape the international system, the American news media have the power to fix people’s perceptions of countries that operate within that system. If the country is not a Western one, the image Western journalists often bestow upon it is of a failed and conflict-ridden state.

As we finished our interview, which is the subject of Chapter 1, I thanked him for his time. I explained how a generation of American public servants and aid professionals—my generation, the one that professionally came of age post-9/11—had spent years in the country he once led and how fondly we think of Afghanistan and the Afghan people. I started to stand up, but he gestured for me to sit down. He asked:

But how do the *common* Americans see Afghanistan? How do they understand Afghanistan? What perception do they have of us? As a violent people? As a people with a history, with a culture, or a people simply with guns and violence? What we see in the Western press . . . it is not the story in Afghanistan, in many ways. We are affected by violence, of course. But we are also a people, a country with weddings, with life, with people meeting. There’s music, there’s culture, there’s history, there’s niceties in life. Do they recognize that? Because the American media has not given that picture to the American people . . . Or has it? Have they? No.

There was sincerity in his voice, a nostalgia for the time when American journalists expressed nothing but respect for his country and his leadership, as Tom Brokaw and so many others had. Years after that cold night in 2003, Karzai would try to dilute the Western media’s portrayal of him as corrupt and his country as backward by discrediting the sources, but the reputation of his country in the West remained as a violent and failed nation.

“No,” I confirmed. “They mostly have not.”<sup>5</sup>

THIS BOOK IS about the storytelling and framing of modern Afghanistan and of America's longest war from the perspectives of two nations' media systems. It reviews how news intersects with international politics and discusses the global power and reach of the U.S. news media, especially within the context of the post-9/11 era. It is based on years of interviews conducted between 2009 and 2017, in Kabul, Washington, and New York. It also draws from two bodies of communications scholarship that are analogous yet rarely linked together. The first is on hegemony and the U.S. news media's relationship with American society and the government. This includes literature on indexing and cascading; agenda-building and agenda-setting; framing; and conflict reportage. The second is on the American news media's relationship with the world and how *national bias*—defined as creating and maintaining a shared sense of identity—and *ethnocentrism*—defined as evaluating other people's cultures according to the standards of one's own culture—are fixed phenomena in international news. This includes examining the different kinds of press systems that exist globally, and how they interact with each other. In addition, the book examines the sociology of journalism development in Afghanistan since its news media became independent in 2001, and the habits and underlying philosophies its journalists have developed, including their tendency to look to U.S. news to make sense of the volatility, policies, and politics affecting their everyday lives.

It is broken into eight chapters. Chapter 1 acquaints the reader with the impact of the U.S. and Western news media in Afghanistan through the story of how President Hamid Karzai banished *New York Times* reporter Matthew Rosenberg in August 2014, during the final weeks of his presidency. The chapter uses this story as an entry point to the perceived hegemony U.S. news has in international affairs by foreign actors. It explains how news and nationalism intersect with international politics and introduces the reader to the groundbreaking yet nascent community of Afghan journalists who saw American and other Western journalists as their professional guides.

The second chapter discusses U.S. news reportage in the wake of 9/11 and how certain habits and norms in American national security journalism drove the coverage. It reviews scholarship on the U.S. news media's relationship with U.S. government and society, especially in the context of international issues and events. The chapter establishes that the foreign policy narrative in Washington is set by a small cohort of U.S. government officials, in addition to international news reporters and editors

for elite news agencies, like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Through interviews with U.S. officials and reporters, it also examines the roles the American government and news play in setting the agenda and framing events for the American public and how the U.S. press maintains an ethnocentric bias in its foreign reportage.

The third chapter examines how the American public was reintroduced to Afghanistan after the events of 9/11 and how the U.S. broadcast and print media began to frame “the good war” in October 2001. It analyzes the American news media’s relationship with Afghanistan beginning in the 1980s; the reality it has constructed since 2001 about Afghanistan and the conflict; the waning coverage of Afghanistan during the Iraq War from 2003 to 2009; its increased coverage when President Barack Obama took office in 2009; and its coverage since 2014, as the United States began to prepare to disengage militarily from the country. It also reviews some U.S. officials’ perceptions about their responsibilities to the press. During these 15 years, the news coverage, especially that of the broadcast news media, was tightly indexed to the degree of White House attention to the war and the intensity of conflict for American soldiers. Yet some American print news agencies, especially the Associated Press, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*, have stayed committed to the Afghanistan news story despite decreased American presidential attention.

Having established the attitudes and norms of American national security news, Chapter 4 introduces the reader to the history of the Afghan news media, which was under either authoritarian or hyperpartisan control throughout the 20th century. This chapter explores the political and sociocultural factors that have contributed to the state of modern Afghan journalism, and how Afghan government officials have treated their press since 2001. Through the perspectives of more than 30 elite Afghan journalists, the chapter also examines the habits and norms local journalists have created, in addition to the impact of Western aid money and the presence of Western journalists in the country. The chapter also introduces the reader to the independent news media organizations that have helped to drive dramatic change in Afghan politics and society, often at a seemingly breakneck speed. In sum, it explains the patchwork media landscape of present-day Afghanistan and how it reflects the various power struggles between the country’s politicians, extremists, strongmen, and progressives—and foreign actors.

Chapter 5 describes the various sociological constraints modern Afghan journalists have to work within, not the least of which is a highly volatile

security environment within which they are often targeted with threats, in addition to a high degree of economic instability that jeopardizes their organizations' sustainability. Based on the interviews, it explores the ways in which they think of themselves, their relationships with Afghan government officials, and their roles in Afghan society. (Some of the journalists were interviewed on the record and are quoted by name, while others—due to Institutional Review Board [IRB] requirements for my dissertation research—were interviewed on background and are not named.) It also surveys the dense networks that Afghan journalists have created with American and other Western journalists to report news stories. Afghan journalists have an inherent national bias and are proud that U.S. elite news professionals find Afghanistan newsworthy as this confers legitimacy on Afghanistan's importance in the world. Yet given their nascent state, they acknowledged that they depend on Western journalists' reportage to hold Afghanistan's powerful accountable.

Chapter 6 focuses on the correspondents in Afghanistan who report for American news agencies, most, but not all, of whom are American. It reflects the views of more than a dozen news professionals who reported for elite news organizations on Afghanistan on how they perceived their roles. (As with the Afghan reporters interviewed, some of them were interviewed on the record, while others were interviewed on background and will not be named.) It discusses their agenda-setting power and their hegemonic role as purveyors of information to their primary and intended audience, Americans, and to the secondary audiences, such as Afghan journalists. The chapter explores these journalists' relationship with Afghan officials and explores what they believe the future of Afghan journalism will be.

Chapter 7 reviews how Afghan journalists perceive the "reality" journalists for American news organizations have constructed about Afghanistan, and how Afghan journalists make meaning from it. While reporters for U.S.-based news agencies saw Afghanistan through an American, or Western, lens, they rarely had the kind of access to U.S. officials' secret information that Karzai, and many others, assumed they had. The actual day-to-day mechanics of U.S. press-state relations is embroiled in an infuriating state of mistrust and dysfunction for both parties. Afghan journalists and a majority of Afghan officials assume that U.S. journalists are advocates for the U.S. government's foreign policies and are sometimes chauvinistically nationalistic, even jingoistic. The U.S. journalists vehemently reject this notion and the suggestion

that their coverage is blindly patriotic. Yet they agree that they are largely aligned with U.S. officials in protecting and advancing America's general interests abroad. This is natural. The majority of journalists writing for American agencies are American; they have a built-in worldview and sense of identity that is difficult to abandon when they are writing primarily for American audiences. But Afghan journalists also are emotionally affected by the news stories they read that reduce their country to being shattered and hopeless. Consuming U.S. news about Afghanistan can be an affront to their Afghan identity and can inspire intense feelings of nationalism and frustration within them.

WHILE THERE IS a detailed methodology section in Appendix I, there are a few issues I'd like to emphasize about how I constructed this book. First, I chose Afghanistan because of my professional history with the country and my ability to travel there with relative ease. In many ways, not the least of which is the sheer duration of the U.S. government and news media's engagement in the country, Afghanistan provides an exceptional new case study, a microcosm for press-state relations from two perspectives. While my initial research had included Pakistan as another case study for comparison, I chose to focus solely on the Afghanistan case study because of its richness.

Second, I use "the United States" and "the West" interchangeably. This is because, in Afghanistan especially, the United States is seen as a leader of other Western countries and a creator of liberal international institutions that currently give some structure to global affairs. The Afghan journalists and officials would also speak of the United States and the West interchangeably in their interviews. I also focus on reporters who work for U.S. news agencies, but not all of them are American. This is the case, for instance, with the *New York Times*' Carlotta Gall and Associated Press's Kathy Gannon, who are English and Canadian, respectively. For this reason, when speaking about U.S. correspondents, I sometimes do not simplify them as Americans but as "U.S. journalists" or "U.S. reporters" to indicate that they work for U.S. news agencies.

Third, the qualitative research reflected in the second half of the book focuses on three years in U.S.-Afghan relations and the U.S.-led war: 2010, 2012, and 2016. This corresponds with the years when I conducted my fieldwork in Kabul. My interviews therefore are focused mainly on Afghan and U.S. correspondents who were in Kabul at the same time that I was. I realize this does not cover the entire universe of correspondents, but

I believe the overall sample is strong. Since this research was originally initiated for my doctoral dissertation at Columbia University, it was subject to their IRB processes, which deemed all of the journalists I was interviewing to be vulnerable subjects. As mentioned earlier, all of the interviews from 2010 and 2012 are anonymous and, to curb confusion, I did not give them pseudonyms in the text. My interviews in 2016, and the few I completed from Washington and New York in 2017, were on the record and their names are noted accordingly. Those interviewed in 2016 and 2017 also included U.S. officials. All of them are public officials and gave consent to speak on the record. In addition, because of the permanence of U.S. print bureaus in the country and the parachute nature of broadcast journalism, I conducted few interviews with U.S. broadcast reporters, yet since most Afghan news agencies are broadcast, the strong majority of Afghan journalists I interviewed were broadcasters.

Last, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the limitations of my own identity as an American researcher in Afghanistan as well as the biases journalists may have had toward me because of my nationality, gender, and past professional history as a U.S. government official. While I believe that I captured their unfiltered opinions on the issues I asked about during the interviews, it is not entirely unlikely that they felt they could not be completely candid. Also, to a certain extent, my own research was a sort of parachute journalism. For the sake of this research project, my time in Afghanistan amounted to approximately six months. Collectively, however, I have spent two years in the country over the course of 13 years, which gives me some long-term perspective on the place and the ability to filter out the most salient issues worthy of exploration.

AMERICANS AREN'T THE only ones paying attention to U.S. news about the world; those affected by U.S. foreign policy rarely live within American borders. The people who often care the most about U.S. foreign policy are the government officials, journalists, and publics who are directly affected by the policies created at a distance in Washington. American news has been largely accessible to interested foreign audiences for more than a century, yet technology has accelerated a media boomerang pattern for foreign correspondence: News written abroad for an American audience travels almost instantaneously back to the government officials, journalists, and citizens of the nation U.S. correspondents are talking about.

To most foreign citizens interested in the United States—if not to most Americans—Washington is an intangible place. But a surefire way to get a



sense of a nation and its priorities and worldview is to consume its news. People who speak English and have access to digital media can turn to U.S. news—normally, elite and mainstream agencies—to make their own meaning of U.S. intentions toward their country or region, and to see how America is projecting their country's image across a global media landscape. While people can use the news of another nation to gain a sort of intelligence about its intentions in the world, it can also provoke strong nationalistic feelings when they see themselves through foreign citizens' eyes. Contrary to those who hoped that a digital infrastructure would increase two-way flows of respectful dialogue, a greater flow of news and information does not necessarily bring understanding and peace between people and nations. National identity and bias can be maintained and reinforced through their national press, which travels internationally. And news content is both reported and understood ethnocentrically.

In foreign affairs, journalists are not merely observers to a story; they are participants in it. The stories they choose to tell, and how they tell them, can become dominant narratives in global politics. And America's news narratives provide a national representation. Journalists who report about the world for U.S. news agencies are profoundly important liaisons. In developing countries, they can even be official and unofficial mentors to local press cohorts.

Given the longevity of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and the Afghan news media's dramatic proliferation since 2001, Afghanistan provides a fascinating case study for the role of journalists in conflict and diplomacy. By identifying, framing, and relaying narratives that affect the normative environment, U.S. correspondents have played unofficial diplomatic and developmental roles. They have negotiated the meaning of war and peace. Indirectly and directly, they have supported Afghan journalists in their professional growth. The impact they have had on Western public perceptions of the war and in the country's development have been profound: They did not just provide the first draft of history on this enduring post-9/11 entanglement between the United States and Afghanistan—they actively shaped it.

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